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ABSTRACT

Literary gaps were identified by Wolfgang Iser in 1974 as "vacant pages" that invite the reader to reflect and enter into the text thereby motivating students to experience the text as reality. Arthur Applebee, in 1979, identified three categories to distinguish children's types of interaction with stories: (1) the complexity of literary and personal experiences, (2) a mastery of techniques and conventions of literary forms, and (3) the relationship between the experience of the work and the reader's own life. To determine the types of interaction that occur with modern fantasy, a picture story book was read to children in first, fourth, and sixth grades. They were then asked to fill in the literary gaps with their own writing. The examples of children's writing revealed that they draw upon their experiences with literature and life to interact with the work and this supported the literary theories of Iser and Applebee. (A list of steps for teachers to use to elicit creative responses from children and a booklist of modern fantasies for children age six through twelve are included.) (SRT)

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LITERARY GAPS INVITE CREATIVE INTERACTION

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LITERARY GAPS INVITE CREATIVE INTERACTION

Children's rich experiences in life and reading adventures hold them in good stead when they confront today's literature. By reading the offerings of contemporary writers of modern fantasy, one can especially sense some of the best and most thought-provoking creators of fanciful writing.

These writers of picture story narrative often omit detailed bits and pieces of storyline and dialogue. Their nature is often implied and concealed rather than made explicit and revealed. This is not to suggest that there exists unconnected story fragments. The narrative is held and joined together in a cohesive and meaningful manner by the children's creative thinking efforts which supply the unknown details.

Literary gaps are identified by Wolfgang Iser (1974) as "vacant pages" which invite the reader to reflect and enter into the text forming connections and conceptions and so creating the configurative meaning of what is being read. The reader can reflect, and through reflection create the motivation through which one can experience the text as a reality.

Children's reaction to stories functions as an archive of their past experiences. Arthur Applebee (1979) identified three categories to distinguish children's types of interactions with stories:

1) the complexity of literary and personal experiences

2) a mastery of techniques and conventions of literary forms

3) the relationship between the experience of the work and the reader's own life

To determine the types of interaction of children to modern fantasy, a picture story book, Louis the Fish (Yorinks, 1980) was read to children in grades 1, 4, and 6. Their re-writing of the story was then requested to fill in the literary blanks. It was assumed that the most imaginative fantasy would result in the most creative writing as Chukovski (1963) stated ..."the value of such tales is in developing, strengthening, enriching and directing children's thinking and emotional responses...".

The following are examples of children's creative efforts at filling in the narrative blanks to Louis the Fish.

Grade 1: (underlined portions indicate children's creative gap filling).

Once there was a boy named louis. His Dad was a butcher. His Dad wanted him to be a butcher. But Louis did not like meat. When he was 20 his Mom and Dad died in a car accident. And he took over the butcher shop. And one day he was a fish! And one day Al found him in a train. He was a big fish, too big to eat. And Al had found out that an old witch had put a spell on Louis. That old witch was never seen again. And one day a pretty queen came and she took the spell off Louis and he was a boy again. And Louis and Al were happy.

It is apparent in this rewriting that the first grader was drawing upon personal knowledge of how deaths occur in real life

and an age when one starts out on the path of adult life. The richness of a literary background is quite obvious when the motiffs of witches and spell-breaking queens are incorporated into the narrative. Although in Yorink's original story, Louis does not turn into a boy again, this re-written version reflects a six year-old child's relationship of life to the story when the happiest ending reflects one's own vision of childhood.

Grade 4: (underlined portion indicates child's creative gap filling).

One morning Louis had the urge for fish. He never really liked fish, but wherever he looked, he saw fish. Then right in front of him he saw a note. It said:

I made you have the
urge, but in a week
or so you will be
a fish.
Signed: X.X.O.

Then Louis asked himself "Who sent this note to me?" Then his mother came in and said "Honey, your dad and I have been talking." "We think you should work in your dad's butcher shop." "But why do I have to do this?" Because your great great grandfather was a butcher; your great grandpa was a butcher; your grandpa is a butcher, now we want you to be a butcher. So, we want you to work in your dad's butcher shop because some day it will be yours." Louis didn't like this. He had hated meat ever since he was born. He never knew why he hated meat. Louis sighed, and said "All right, when do I start?" "Tomorrow right after school."

The next day Louis's father put him right to work. Father said, "See these fish. They have to be cleaned in 20 minutes." When Louis picked up the first fish it started talking. It said:

Louis, I promised you
something. Now is the time
for you to meet your
real family.

The fish blinked twice and instantly, Louis became a fish. No one has ever seen Louis again, but every year, on the anniversary

of the day he disappeared, there is one extra fish, in the butcher shop that no one knows where it came from.

In an almost complete re-write, this student has demonstrated a knowledge of complex story conventions. By starting out the story with a character twist, the writer is giving us a personal touch to the character, Louis. The addition of the poetic notes from the fish indicates a previous exposure to such a literary device. The conversations created follow Iser's theory that diaglogue may be created between characters when such is only alluded to in the original story. The maturity of the fourth grader's conclusion shows that this age is willing to accept with some modification, the original coda.

Grade 6: (underlined portions indicate child's creative gap filling).

One day Louis turned into a fish. It all started when he was a little boy. Louis hated meat but loved fish. He got a job cleaning fish tanks at the dentist store. One day his mother said, "Its time for you to quit your job and work in the butcher shop. "But"..."No buts"..."but, but no." So Louis worked in the shop. One day his mother and dad died of meat poisoning. Louis inherited the shop. Louis thought of fish all the time now. He would sit for hours on end and think and draw fish. He had fishtheria. It got so bad that he saw fish everywhere. He saw super fish in his dreams that rescued him from giant lamb chops and large steaks.

One night he had a real bad dream and every kind of meat you could imagine was there. The head of the meat which was a sirloin steak with a cigar said "Its the last of you kid." And then all of a sudden they started coming closer and no super fish was to be seen and then and there his clothes started turning green and blue and he turned into super fish. Suddenly he awoke. He couldn't move. He was all slimy. He had really turned into a

fish. He was late for work. He slimed and got dressed. He stuffed wet wads of toilet paper in his jacket to keep him moist. He got on the bus with only a few problems. Then the police arrested him and threw him in a tank in the pet shop. A lot of people came to see him but never bought cause every time they got too close they would see a giant lamb chop come at them.

This student's re-write, as does the 4th grader's, begins the story where it is more personally meaningful and filled with dramatic conflict. The use of the "flashback" quickly provides the necessary background information. The cause of the parents' death provides some comic relief as a new inventive word for a malady is clearly retribution in the mind of a 12 year-old child. Transitions from one episode to another are provided with logical reasoning. Even the conclusion is built to guarantee the future existence of the protagonist.

These examples of children's writing strongly support the literary theories of Iser and Applebee. Children draw upon their experiences with literature and life to interact dynamically with the author's works. The best of modern fantasy may elicit the best in children's creative thinking and writing. Northrup Frye (1984) states that the teaching of writing is inseparably a part of the teaching of reading and that the place of literature is to provide the verbal element in the training of the imagination. "The imagination is not a self-indulgent, ornamental, or escapist faculty; it is the constructive power of the mind."

The following steps are suggested when teachers may want to connect reading and writing to produce the ultimate in creative imaginative responses:

* Select reading fare that is rich in characterization, plot development, and that offers children something of value to consider.
* Select reading fare that can be read aloud to a group of children or that an individual would want to read independently.
* Prepare children with the forewarning that certain gaps exist in the best of literature and that their involvement will fill the gaps to provide a sense of reality to the story.
* After the actual reading (preferably aloud for initial experiences) elicit questions that concern themselves with the blanks that children may want to fill (do not allow oral responses if writing is the goal), i.e., "What more would you like to know?"
* Provide plenty of time for rewriting the narrative and encourage editing for the older students to polish their creations.
* Final student creations may be made available for others to read.

To provide teachers with the materials to induce the "constructive powers of the mind," the following book list is suggested for children age 6 through 12:

Children's Booklist for
"Filling in the Fantasy Blanks"

Bodecker, N.M. (1981). The Lost String Quartet. New York: Atheneum.

Bunting, Eve. (1984). The Man Who Could Call Down Owls. New York: Macmillan.

Cole, Brock. (1984). The Winter Wren. New York: Farrar-Straus-Girous. (literary tale).

Drescher, Henrik. (1982). The Strange Appearance of Howard Cranebill, Jr. New York: Lothrup, Lee & Shepard.

. (1983). Simon's Book. New York: Lothrup, Lee & Shepard.

. (1984). Looking for Santa Claus. New York: Lothrup, Lee & Shepard.

Fleischman, Paul. (1979). The Birthday Tree. Illus. by Marcia Sewall. New York: Harper & Row.

. (1983). The Animal Hedge. Illus. by Lydia Dabcovich. New York: Dutton.

Foreman, Michael. (1982). Land of Dreams. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

. (1981). Trick a Tracker. New York: Philomel Books.

Heidi, Florence Parry. (1981). Treehorn's Treasure. Illus. by Edward Gorey. Holiday House.

. (1971). The Shrinking of Treehorne. Illus. by Edward Gorey. Holiday House.

. (1984). Treehorn's Wish. Illus. by Edward Gorey. Holiday House.

Jeschke, Susan. (1979). Angela and Bear. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Keeping, Charles. (1969). Joseph's Yard. New York: Watts International.

. (1970). Through the Window. New York: Oxford University Press.

. (1980). Willie's Fire Engine. New York: Oxford University Press.

Menuhin, Yehudi and Christopher Hope. (1983). The King, The Cat, and the Fiddle. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.

Oram, Hiawyn. (1982). Angry Arthur. Illus. by Satoshi Kitamura. New York: Holt, Rinehart Winston.

. (1985). In the Attic. Illus. by Satoshi Kitamura. New York: Holt, Rinehart Winston.

Sendak, Maurice. (1978). Rabbit Island. Illus. by Jorg Muller. Trans. by Ann Conrad Lammers. New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich.

Van Allsburg, Chris. (1979). The Garden of Abdul Gasazi. Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co.

. (1981). Jumanji.

. (1982). Ben's Dream.

. (1983). The Wreck of the Zephyr.

. (1984). The Mysteries of Harris Burdick.

Yorinks, Arthur. (1980). Louis the Fish. Illus. by Richard Egielski. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

. It Happened in Pinsk. Illus. by Richard Egielski. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux.

. Sid and Sol. Illus. by Richard Egielski. New York: Farrar, Straus, Grioux.

Adult References:

Applebee, Arthur N. (1979, September). "Children and Stories. Learning the Rules of the Game." Language Arts, 56, 6. pp. 641-646.

Chukovsky, Kornei. (1963). Translated and edited by Miriam Morton. From Two to Five. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Frye, Northrup. (1985). "Foreward." The Child as Critic. Glenna Davis Sloan (2nd Edition). New York: Columbia University, Teacher's College.

Iser, Wolfgang. (1974). The Implied Reader. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 40.

. The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press.